

HARRIET and the PIPER

By
Kathleen Norris

Illustrations by
Irwin Myers

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CHAPTER XII—Continued.

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Harriet had not dared to hope that they would accept the situation so quietly, or that the world would. There were callers on the terrace every afternoon, there were pleasant congratulations and good wishes, there were a few paragraphs in the social weeklies. Richard had for years been too busy for mere entertaining, and the dinner parties and luncheons to the new Mrs. Carter. It was generally felt, must wait until next season.

To glance at the gold ring on her finger made Harriet feel as if a happiness almost shameful was bared to view. Her new position, modestly as she filled it, was yet a high position. She saw Richard's growing affection and trust, if he did not. She could afford to wait.

"But when are you and Dick Carter going to dine with us?" Mary Putnam said, one afternoon, at tea. Madame Carter, whose Victorian ideal of romance was not at all dissatisfied with the idea of the employer marrying his daughter's beautiful governess, smiled significantly.

"They're very odd lovers, my dear," she said to Mary with an eloquent glance. Mary laughed, and looked at Harriet, whose face was suddenly crimson, though she tried to laugh, too. The visitor, with instant kindness, covered the little break.

"Whenever they're ready, they're going to dine with me!" she said, patting Harriet's hand with real affection and understanding. But Mary was free to reflect. She had the eyes of a contented woman, freed from her own problem for those of others. "And Harriet is certainly mad about Richard," Mary mused.

But with the rest of the world she had to decide that there was something in the affair that she did not understand.

When everyone else had gone from the terrace, and the late afternoon light was throwing clear shadows across the warm red bricks, Nina and Ida Tabor remained, talking. "And now we positively must go in, Nina!" Ida said. "We've wasted this whole afternoon! I have to get packed if I'm going to the Jays!"

"But you're not going to the Jays!" Nina said in soft, sweet, confident reminder.

"But I must, darling!"

"No, you mustn't!"

"But, dearest, I truly have to—"

"But, Ladybird," Nina laughed happily. "I sent them a message this afternoon that you were staying with me! So now," she finished triumphantly, "that's settled! And we'll go to bed early, with books, and talk, and maybe creep down for something to eat about eleven, as we did that other night—"

"Nina," Mrs. Tabor said, in a new voice, interrupting her, "you didn't telephone Mrs. Jay, did you?"

"Indeed I did!"

"Well, then, you were extremely impertinent and officious," said a new voice, that Nina hardly recognized.

Poor Nina! Harriet found her sobbing on her bed, half an hour later, and took it for a sign that the wound would cure, that Nina did not resent her sympathy and comfort. Nina was still heaving with deep sobs, albeit taking steps toward a hot bath and a becoming gown, when Ida went away. Her farewells were made only to the composed interloper, who went with her pleasantly to the hall door, and turned back with some remark for Bottomley that was in the perfect tone of the mistress. Ida's heart was hot within her as she looked her last at Crownlands, in the mellow light of the summer twilight.

CHAPTER XIII.

Royal Blondin presently came to pay his respects to Harriet in her changed position. Nina had told her that he had been forbidden the house, in December; they had seen him only two or three times since their return from Bermuda, and then accidentally. Harriet was thankful to believe the affair between him and Nina well over. The girl was growing up now, there were other men in her world, and for the list of her eighteenth birthday party she had merely mentioned his name among others.

Three days before the garden party

that was to mark the girl's anniversary Royal drifted in with the assurance that was quite characteristic of him. He rarely accepted an invitation, or waited for one. Perhaps he was clever enough to know that half his acquaintances detested him theoretically, but were glad to have him about. Nina and Harriet came in from an afternoon at the club to find him playing with languid hands at the piano, and he lazily rose to greet them. While Nina was there, his attitude toward both was pleasantly impersonal, but his suggestion, which was more like a command, that she run upstairs and dress early, so that they might have a talk before dinner, sent the girl flying, and he and Harriet could speak more freely.

"Well, Harriet, I congratulate you! How does it feel to be a married woman? I saw your name in an evening paper; of course I was delighted for you."

"Money and position don't really mean much to me," Harriet said, unencouragingly.

"My first sensation," Blondin went on, "was one of satisfaction. I thought to myself that my own cause, with Nina, was safe now. That you trusted me, and I had every reason to trust you."

Harriet looked away for a brief silence, brought her eyes to his face. She felt suddenly sick.

"Roy, you're not still serious about Nina?"

"I have never been anything else," he said, delicately.

"But—but why?" Harriet asked.

"I like the girl," he reminded her pleasantly. "I hope she is not entirely indifferent to me—"

"Indifferent! She's at the age that marries anybody!" Harriet said, indignantly.

"You give me hope," Royal said with a bow.

"Her father very violently opposes it," Harriet said, after a troubled silence.

"I am well aware of that, my dear. Her father forbade me the house last December. I submitted; the girl submitted. But we made our plans. I fancy we will not have any difficulty now."

"You mean that you are engaged?"

"An understanding. We have corresponded, seen each other now and then through Ida Tabor. It's," he smiled, dreamily, "extremely romantic, of course," he said.

Harriet felt she could have killed him.

"You understand that she won't have one penny, Roy. I know her father. He won't yield. He'll forbid it; he'll not hesitate. If she does it against his will, she will have to wait three years for her money. Three years—! Roy, she wouldn't be happy three weeks! Mr. Carter spoke to me about it the only time we've spoken of you. He said that he was glad the affair had ended naturally; that you were not the man to make Nina happy, and that he would rather have her suffer anything, and find out her mistake at once, than have her heart broken, and her money wasted, through several wretched years!"

Blondin had listened to this quietly, his eyes moving from her lips to her own earnest eyes, and wandering over her animated face.

"I count on you to be my advocate, my dear Harriet," he said, after a moment's silence. "Richard Carter believes in you; he has great faith in your judgment. If you represent to him that you believe this to be a wise step all round, we shall have no further trouble—"

"I can't honestly tell him so, Roy!" the girl interrupted.

"Can't you?" Blondin said. He looked across the open hallway to Nina, descending in fresh ruffles and ribbons, and raised his voice. "Here she is—looking like the very rose of girls! Come on now, Nina, you aren't going to belong to anybody else but me for a while!" he said. But as he turned to leave Harriet, he added again: "Can't you? Think it over."

The girl thought it over with a maddening and feverish persistence that presently caused her a sensation of actual sickness. Vague speculations churned and seethed in the weary brain that could find no beginning and no end to them. To have made a clean breast of the whole matter months ago would have meant a delicious sense of freedom from responsibility now, but then under those circumstances would she, Harriet, have been here now? Certainly, even in the present purely technical sense, she would not have been the second Mrs. Richard Carter, nor would she have held her present position of trust and responsibility.

While Nina and her lover murmured on the terrace Harriet brooded on these things, and after dinner that evening she gave Richard so sharp a warning that he sent at once for Nina, and with a clouded brow and angry eyes briefly requested Harriet to be present while he spoke to her.

Nina came at once, with an innocent expression on her rather heavy young face. She seated herself near Harriet, and her father went to the point at once.

"Nina," he said, seriously, "you saw

Royal Blondin this afternoon, didn't you?" And as Nina answered only with an ugly glance at Harriet, the betrayer, he added, "Didn't I ask you not to see him any more, several months ago?"

"Yes, you did," Nina said, in a low tone, and with a heaving breast.

"I hope, and we all hope, that you will marry some day," Richard said. "But you are too young now to make a wise choice. And until you are a little older, you will have to take my word for it that such an affair would only lead you to misery and regret."

Nina mumbled something bravely. "I didn't hear you," her father said.

"I said, I didn't see what you could do about it," the girl repeated, desperately.

For a few moments of silence Richard merely looked gravely at his daughter. Then he clasped his fine hands on the desk before him, and cleared his throat.

"I cannot do as much as I should like, Nina," he conceded, "but I shall do what I can. But first let me ask you: have you promised to marry Mr. Blondin?"

Silence. Nina looked at the floor. Richard repeated his question.

"Yes, I have—and you can't kill me for it!" Nina said, and burst into tears.

"Well," the father resumed, when Harriet had supplied a consolatory murmur and a handkerchief, "I'm sorry, of course, Mrs. Tabor carried letters between you, did she? You met him occasionally?"

"Two or three times," Nina said, sniffing and drying her eyes busily.

"You know my reasons for disliking him, Nina," her father said. "He is a man more than twice your age; he has a certain sort of unsavory reputation in his affairs with women. He has no income, no profession, no home; all those things tell against him. You're only a child—"

"I shall be of age Tuesday!" Nina burst forth, resentfully.

"You will be of age Tuesday. True. But you will be my ward, as far as your Uncle Edward's legacy is concerned, for another three years. Now, Nina, if you persist in this folly, against my most earnest advice, I can only forbid the man the house, and lock you in your room in the good old-fashioned way. That I shall do. I shall then give out to the world—that has already had a rare treat at the expense of the Carter family—the news of my utter disapproval of the match. If you manage the marriage in spite of me, I shall forbid you and Blondin my house, and as a matter of course use my right to withhold the payment of your legacy for three years, and stop your present allowance, and your credit with the shops. That's all I can do! And I do it, Nina," said Richard in a softer tone. "I do it to hasten the inevitable, my dear! I do it to bring you back to your father sooner instead of later; to give you only one year of disillusionment and suffering. Instead of seven or eight!"

It must be a brave girl, thought Harriet, who could persist in any course, after that. But Nina had the impregnable armor of ignorance and pride, and she only snuffed pathetically again, and shrugged her shoulders.

"You do everything in the world to make my marriage a failure!" she said with the irrepressible tears. "And I suppose you'll be delighted if it is! And I don't see—if a woman can marry a rich man, why a man shouldn't sometimes be glad if a girl has money! I'm proud to help him out, if he'll let me. He says he won't—why, we had planned going—well, just everywhere, Honolulu and southern California and just everywhere, only now he won't go! He says he is going to stay right here, and take a position with an art magazine that he just hates, and work it all off—before we go, if it takes years—"

"Work what all off?" Harriet asked, simply and quietly.

"This money that a friend of his really lost, but he has taken it upon himself," Nina answered, a little mollified. "It was eleven thousand dollars, and he has paid off about four, and anyway, I hate so much talk about money!" she finished, angrily.

"My dear," Harriet said, as Richard, with a troubled face, remained silent, "it isn't the money that we are worrying about. Why, ask your father, Nina! Ask him if he wouldn't write Royal Blondin a check for any sum today, any sum, if you and he would promise solemnly to wait three years more. You will only be twenty-one then, Nina, still such a child!"

Harriet paused, glancing at Richard for encouragement; he nodded eagerly, and she went on:

"Marriage is a tremendous thing, Nina, and the only thing that makes it right—"

"If you're going to say love," Nina broke in, scornfully, "you didn't marry Father for love!"

"I was going to say mutual understanding and respect," Harriet said, quietly, but the splendid color flooded her face as she spoke, "and you do not understand life, Nina, or men, or marriage. Royal Blondin is a charming man, and a gifted man, but he is an adventurer, dear; he is a man who has lived in all sorts of places, known all

sorts of persons, excepted all sorts of queer codes. There are coarse elements in him, Nina, things that would utterly sicken and frighten you! Your father is right; you would be back with us in a few months or years, perhaps with a child, perhaps shattered in body as well as soul—not free to take up your life again with Ward and Amy, but scared and embittered and changed—!"

"My God, how that woman loves the child!" Richard said to himself, watching her. To him she seemed inspired. Her eyes were blurred with tears, her voice shaking, and she had leaned over to clasp Nina's hands, and so hold the girl's unwilling attention.

"Nina, can't you trust your father that far?" Harriet finished. "Can't you realize that a man like Royal, embarrassed for money—no matter if he truly admires you, and truly means to make you happy—can't think of you without thinking also of what your generous checks are going to mean to him? Write him a check for eleven thousand, Nina, as a consolation for delaying the marriage a year. Try it!"

Nina rose to her feet. Her trembling mouth was desperately scornful, and her eyes brimming, although she fought tears.

"I don't know why my own family is the first to think that nobody could possibly love me for myself!" she said, in a breaking voice. "First Harriet ruins my friendship with Ladybird—and then—then—!"

"Listen, Nina," her father said. He and Harriet had come around to stand beside her, and he had encircled the shaking and protesting shoulders with his arm. "I have just telephoned Fox to make reservations for me on the next Brazilian steamer. I shall have to be a month or six weeks in Rio de Janeiro every year now. Now, I've just been wondering why you and Harriet don't come with me this first trip? We stop at the Barbados and Bahia; it's a magnificent steamer—swimming tanks and gymnasium; you'll love it, and you'll have a touch of the South American countries, too, a chance to try your Spanish. Why not put off this marriage idea for a year, come along with me; you'll make steamer acquaintances, you'll broaden out a little bit—"

"I won't go anywhere!" sobbed Nina, wildly, turning for flight, "because I'm going to kill myself!"

Harriet only waited long enough after her dramatic exit to give Richard



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a reassuring nod. Then she hurried after Nina.

The girl was sobbing on her bed, and for awhile she answered Harriet's soothing touch of voice and hand only with angry jerks. Then they fell to talking, and Nina confided for the first time fully in the older woman. Royal's letters, his exquisite cards, sent with flowers, the poems he had written her; here they all were. Harriet sympathized, sighed, and consoled her affectionately. Presently she was able to suggest a new thought to Nina, one that hurt not but be palatable to the girl's hurt spirit.

"You see, you're only seventeen, Nina," Harriet said, "the age when most girls are still in the schoolroom, long before they have affairs! Well, you're not interested in college, so that ought to give you three or four clear years of girlhood. You're bound to have other affairs, you've proved that! You go to South America—perhaps there is some interesting man on the steamer; you go to Canada—to California; the world is yours. Now, Royal is different. He is an experienced man of affairs; he will always have an attraction for women, and they for him. You aren't his match, now, Nina. In a few years you may be—"

"I'm not jealous!" Nina said, proudly. But Harriet smiled.

"Yes, you are jealous. You wouldn't be a real true woman if you weren't!" she accused. A reluctant dimple tugged

at Nina's pouting mouth. She did not dislike the idea of potential despotism, of the traveled, experienced woman of the world, confidant of her charm.

"If I offered a check to Royal, do you suppose he'd accept it?" she remarked, after dark musing. She was sitting on the edge of her bed now, and Harriet was brushing her hair.

"If you really are worried about his business affairs, Nina, why not try it?" Harriet suggested, sensibly. To this Nina returned a pouting.

"I'm perfectly willing to try it!" And as a great concession she added, with a sigh: "And I'll tell him what Father thinks!"

"Now you're talking like a woman who has herself well in hand!" Harriet said, approvingly. "When are you to see him?"

"He's coming over especially to see Father tomorrow," Nina said. "I suppose I might as well go down," she added, eyeing herself gloomily in her mirror, "for Ward and that boy seem absolutely at a loss for amusement!"

"And I'll be down presently," Harriet said. But when Nina was gone she walked slowly to her own dressing table, and sat down, and regarded herself steadily, and with heavy eyes. Unexpectedly, here between the family dinner and the early going to bed, on a June evening, a crisis in her life was confronting her, and she knew that she must meet it.

Ward's guest was only the young Saunders boy, who had been with them constantly last summer, and who was of absolutely no significance in their lives. And yet Harriet had been introduced to him all over again as "Mrs. Carter"—there was no halfway, in the eyes of the world at least, in this relationship of hers with Richard, and she must begin to take her place in the family.

"Mrs. Carter?" Harriet loved that distinction as if the title, the signature, and the dignity had never been vouchsafed to womankind before. She had marveled at her old self, that had taken "Miss" and "Mrs." with cheerful indifference—why, there was a world-wide chasm between the two! Just to have this silly Saunders boy call her Mrs. Carter, as a matter of course, was to receive the accolade that gave her all her longed-for dreams in one. It was the name of the man she loved, and, even though in a shadowy and unloved way, she liked the title that made her his.

And now she owed him the truth, the whole, painful, humiliating story. If she had told him months ago, so much the better and braver woman she! She had not done so; she had been fighting Nina and his mother then; she had been afraid. But she was not afraid now; he could forgive that long-ago girl of seventeen because her advocate was the woman of twenty-eight, the finished, cultivated, capable woman who had served him and his house, who must win his respect back because she loved him with every fiber of her being.

The words in which she would tell him came to her in a rush. Why—it was nothing! It was less than nothing. In half an hour she would be back here in her room again, with all the past clean and straight at last, with the cloud gone, and with her whole soul singing with hope of the glorious future. For a moment she knelt by her bed, her face in her hands.

She rose to her feet. There was a tap at the door.

It was Bottomley. "If you please, m—Mr. Carter would be so much obliged if you would step down to the library, m." Harriet gave herself a parting glance, and followed the man downstairs.

"Courage!" she said to herself, with her hand on the library door. "I've exaggerated and enlarged upon this thing too long! I've imagined it into an importance that it really hasn't at all!"

Richard was back at his desk; he smiled and rose as she came in. There was another man in the library who rose and faced her, too.

And when Harriet saw him she knew that she was too late. It was Royal Blondin.

A dizziness and sickness came over her as she went slowly to the chair opposite Richard.

"Mr. Blondin has come to talk to me about Nina," Richard said. Harriet somehow moved her dizzy eyes toward Blondin, and she smiled mechanically. But she had to moisten her lips before she could speak.

"I see!" Her voice sounded horribly choked to her; she could find nothing to add to the meaningless words.

"Mr. Blondin asks my consent to an immediate marriage," Richard said. "You know my objections to that, Harriet, of course! We have just been discussing them, as I explained to him. This is a painful matter to me, and I regret it. But Mr. Blondin has given me no choice but to tell him frankly why I think him an unsuitable husband for my daughter. I have told him exactly what my procedure will be in such a case, and I think we understand each other!"

Royal was smiling the serene, dreamy smile that was characteristic of him.

(TO BE CONTINUED)